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ABSTRACT

The United States suffers the highest incidence of interpersonal violence among all industrial nations, and violence among youth is increasing. While the causes of crime and violence are multiple and complex, research indicates that self-esteem is a critical factor as both a source of crime prevention and an essential element of rehabilitation and behavioral change. This paper discusses three conclusions drawn by the author about violence and self-esteem in America: (1) low self-esteem is closely associated with various forms of crime and violence, thus explaining why many rehabilitation and correction programs do not cure violent and abusive behavior; (2) programs that foster self-esteem have proven effective in reducing violence; and (3) parents, child-care providers, law enforcement officials, school personnel, and social workers need to understand the significance of self-esteem and should be trained in strategies to enhance it. After outlining the causal connection between low self-esteem and violence, the author explores various self-esteem inhibitors, such as negative school experiences. Finally, in exploring the question, "Can self-esteem be used to reduce crime and violence?," the writer cites numerous programs which enhance youth self-esteem and which bring about desirable behaviors. (Contains 40 references.) (RJM)

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Prepared for National Council for Self-Esteem
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SELF-ESTEEM AS AN ANTIDOTE TO CRIME AND VIOLENCE

Robert W. Reasoner

Violence has increased like a slow-growing malignancy to the point where it is of vital concern to educators, parents, citizens, and community leaders. It is no longer limited to urban cities but now reaches into almost every community. Having reviewed over 1000 research studies and articles related to the problem, three conclusions become evident:

1. Low self-esteem is closely associated with various forms of crime and violence. It explains why many of our rehabilitation and correction programs have been ineffective in correcting violent and abusive behavior.
2. Programs that foster self-esteem have proven effective in reducing violence.
3. All parents, child care providers, law enforcement officials, school administrators, teachers, social workers, and those who work in drug and alcohol rehabilitation, abuse centers, and correction institutions need to understand the significance of self-esteem and be trained in effective strategies to enhance it.

The Problem

The U.S. now has the highest incidence of interpersonal violence among all industrial nations, and violence among youth is increasing. Police now report that teenagers are involved in 30% of all crimes. Homicide is now the nation's third leading cause of death for elementary and middle school children. It is estimated that by the year 2000 over 8,000 teenagers will be victims of violence every year.(1, 2)

Schools are finding that coping with anti-social and violent behavior is becoming a major problem. Metal detectors are being placed in an increasing number of high schools as more students bring knives and guns to school. It is estimated that 135,000 guns are brought into schools every day. In some urban schools as many as 35% of the students surveyed reported that they carried a gun to school, most often to impress others or to feel important. (2,3,4)

Much of the crime and violence today is related to physical abuse. According to a recent survey in Washington state, 27% of all high school girls and 17% of the boys reported that they were victims of physical or sexual abuse. Today 30% of all emergency room visits by women are the result of domestic assaults, and 2.7 million cases of child abuse and neglect are reported every year. (5,6)

Suicide is becoming a major cause of death for teenagers, with suicide rates having almost quadrupled since 1950 to the point where it is estimated that 50% of all teenagers will contemplate suicide before the completion of high school.(6)

What are the Major Causes of Violence?

Violence grows out of the fabric of a dysfunctional society. It stems from many causes, including abuse, drugs, alcohol, hostility, frustration, class and cultural conflict, and jealousy. By and large, children and adults reflect the treatment they have received. Those abused, for example, tend to end up being abusers.

Children who are physically abused at home are much more likely to act out in violent and aggressive ways by the time they enter kindergarten. Abused children

often misinterpret social encounters as hostile, and view aggression as the only solution to such problems. The results of this study support the notion that physical abuse leads to a cycle of violence, particularly among boys. (7)

Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders has stated that the epidemic of violence--considered the nation's number one health threat--has its roots in the home. The most pervasive form of violence in America is interpersonal--domestic violence, partner abuse, abuse of children and adolescents, and the elderly. She believes that if we ever expect to put an end to violence and victimization in America, we have to start where the violence starts--in our homes and our families.(6)

Studies indicate that parents with alcohol problems have a high potential for abuse and neglect. Personality characteristics of abusers as well as the children of abusers are similar to alcoholics in that both suffer from low frustration tolerance, low self-esteem, impulsivity, dependency, and severe depression.(8,9))

Much has been written about the possible impact of TV, the media, and movies on violence. Most of what young viewers see on TV is likely to promote antisocial behavior, and gender and racial stereotyping. Many children spend more time in front of their TV than they do in school. The average child will have witnessed 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence on television by the end of elementary school. (10)

A major source of crime and violence stems from gang activity. This includes drive-by shootings, preservation of "turf", responding to challenges or threats from other gangs, and retaliation for attacks on gang members. The number of students joining gangs and committing acts of crime and violence is increasing. Youth join gangs for many reasons, including low self-esteem,the need for recognition, stressful home life,peer-pressure, poor academic performance, negative environment, lack of positive support, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. (11)

Indecent exposure is estimated to represent one-third of all reported sex offenses. According to a report published by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, exhibitionists feel compelled to expose themselves in order to relieve tension and anxiety. They have concluded that a significant loss of self-esteem is an immediate cause of the deviant behavior. (12)

Toch in his study of violence concluded there were 10 factors that promoted violence, the most common "self-image compensating" involved aggression in defense of the self-image. (13) Davis substantiated Toch's findings. In his study of youths adjudicated for acts of violence he found that they displayed the characteristics consistent with Toch's typology of committing violence to compensate for their insecurity and low self-esteem. (14)

<u>Self-Esteem As a Causal Factor</u>

The relationship of self-esteem to crime and violence is particularly noticeable among those individuals who engage in repeated criminal activities. A study of those individuals who were identified as persistent recidivists in criminal activities found that they had the common characteristics of general alienation from others, low self-esteem and confidence, and considerable hostility and defiance of moral norms. (15)

Kelley reported a direct correlation between delinquency and low self-esteem. He found evidence of a link between increased self-esteem and a reduction of delinquent behavior. He found that as programs were implemented to raise the level of self-esteem, the incidence of delinquent behavior was reduced. (16)

Studies of drug abusers indicate a positive correlation between level of self-esteem and feelings of locus of control and defiance of authority and self-destructive acts. It has been concluded that the use of drugs is often used to compensate for low self esteem and feelings of a lack of control over one's life. Those with higher self-esteem and greater belief in internal control were less apt to engage in self-destructive behavior. (17)

As a summary of their research Steffenhagen and Burns state, "Low self-esteem either causes or contributes to neurosis, anxiety, defensiveness, and ultimately alcohol and drug abuse and delinquency. We now believe that low self-esteem is the underlying psychodynamic mechanism underlying all deviant behavior."(18)

A number of explanations have been put forth to explain the relationship between self-esteem and crime and violence. Those with high self-esteem seem to be able to cope with shame or insults, whereas those with low self-esteem avoid it at all costs. Individuals with low self-esteem often respond quickly and violently to their perceptions of slight against the self and when they perceive themselves isolated from others. When individuals feel humiliated and powerless to act, they are apt to respond violently. Gestures and comments which imply disrespect together with an emotional response also trigger violence. Thus, those with low self-esteem are more likely to be more angered by verbal attacks than those with high self-esteem. (13) Conversely, those with a strong sense of self do not need to be sustained at the expense of others. They do not need to control or humiliate other people or resort to substance abuse. (19)

Kaplan conducted extensive studies into the causes of violence, including a study of 3,000 7th graders over a period of 3 years. He underscores the significance of self-esteem as a factor in crime and violence. He found that violations to self-esteem through insult, humiliation, or coercion are probably the most important source of anger and aggression. He concluded that those with lower levels of self-esteem were most likely to adopt deviant behavior patterns. He further concluded that delinquent behavior serves to enhance self-esteem for individuals who have experienced failure and lowered self-esteem. (20)

Hogg found that the primary reason juvenile girls run away from home and go into prostitution is because of negative identity development as a result of negative home, school, and peer experiences, child abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. It was found that the most effective way of getting them to separate themselves from prostitution was to help them regain their self-esteem.(21)

There is evidence that the human needs associated with self-esteem are so strong that when one's personal needs for self-worth and self-esteem are not met, individuals will engage in drug or alcohol abuse, or crime and violence to satisfy these needs. For example, Sheriff Block of Los Angeles County, states, " Today kids join gangs because of the need to belong. They don't belong to families; they don't belong to churches, and they don't belong to schools. They see themselves on the outside, and they see no future, no way to get back inside. People gravitate to gangs because they want to belong and to be "somebody" rather than be a nothing.

Today we must focus on enhancing the self-worth and self-esteem of our youth so that they do not seek out and need the gang to meet their basic human needs."(22)

Bartol from his research and analysis of criminal behavior concluded that issues of control, self-esteem, moral development all affect the manner in which human beings perceive and interpret situations. He concludes that many approaches to crime prevention have not been effective because the psychosocial factors have not been adequately addressed.(23) This conclusion has also been substantiated by Gonzales and others who conclude, "To reduce recidivism, prison therapy programs should focus on increased self-esteem. (24)

In a study of institutionalized juveniles it was found that those with low self-esteem tended to compensate for the blow to their self-esteem by neutralizing their crime and rationalizing their behavior to deflect social and self-disapproval. They sometimes sought to gain social status by being incarcerated. They engaged in greater condemnation of authorities, more denial of responsibility, and appeal to higher loyalties. Thus, those with lower self-esteem had less success at rehabilitation and were more apt to return to the penal institution. Furthermore, the study found that with multiple institutionalizations the self-esteem of individuals became lower and the neutralization process became more ingrained and stronger, thus reducing the likelihood of their rehabilitation.(25)

Self-Esteem in School as a Contributing Factor

School experiences can have a significant impact on children's self-esteem. For example, in a study of student tracking in academic areas, it was found that there was a high correlation between track position and various forms of school misconduct and crime, including smoking, drinking, shoplifting, and arrest. Low track students were more likely to be reported for involvement in crime than high track students. The major contributing factor appeared to be low self-esteem associated with being in the low track.(26)

Johnson documented that juvenile delinquents not only had low self-esteem, but that they also had higher feelings of anxiety, repeated a signficantly greater number of grades, and had significantly lower reading skills and achievement. He suggests that juvenile delinquency prevention programs often fail because they are based on incorrect assumptions about the sources of delinquency and overlook the crucial roles of school failure and low self-esteem. (27)

Hyperactivity or attention deficit (ADD) characteristics in children have often been referred to as possible predictors of juvenile delinquency. However, there are indications that children identified as hyperactive may become social problems, not because of their hyperactivity which normally wanes as they become older, but because of the complications of low self-esteem and defeatism that often outlasts the hyperactivity. These attitude problems were found to result in defiant attitudes, impulsive-destructive behavior, frequent occurrences of lawbreaking, alcoholism, and anti-social behavior. (28)

Kaplan found evidence that for individuals who don't feel successful in school and who experience consistent failure, defiance and delinquent behavior serve as a way of getting back at the system. Vandalism permits powerless individuals to strike out against the institutions which control them and to take charge of the situation themselves. This, in turn, seems to enhance their self-esteem. (20)

Can Self-Esteem Be Used to Reduce Crime and Violence?

Self-esteem programs and materials with a strong emphasis on building the elements of self-esteem have now been developed and are being used to address a variety of problems related to crime and violence. All of these programs are based on the premise that as we strengthen self-esteem and develop coping skills we reduce the likelihood of deviant behavior, including crime and violence.

Programs with a strong emphasis on self-esteem are now considered an essential element of rehabilitating offenders and reducing recidivism. For example, all juvenile detention centers in California were recently allocated funds to incorporate self-esteem programs to reduce recidivism. In addition, self-esteem programs are now being used to address such issues as abuse, behavior disorders, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and gang activity.

In a report from Zero to Three by the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs they found that in a child care situation with two or three loving adults, with an environment that is consistent, reliable, safe and familiar they could reduce the incidence of juvenile delinquency to 6% compared with 22% for the normal population.(29)

The Colorado Outward Bound program is one that has had excellent success with juvenile delinquent offenders. The wilderness training experiences are designed to address the characteristics commonly found with this group: low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence in managing relationships, inability to cooperate and communicate effectively, alienation from and resentment toward others. A study conducted to compare comparable groups of delinquents participating in rehabiliation programs found that those in the wilderness training program had a recidivism rate of 20% whereas the control group had a recidivism rate of 42%.(30)

A Camp Fire Girls program used female status offenders as leaders and provided low-income children with an opportunity to participate in Camp Fire activities. The program not only proved to be highly beneficial to the low-income youth, the status offenders who served as coleaders in this program enhanced their skills and self-esteem. Some of those who had dropped out of school completed their schooling while others went on to additional training. (31)

In a comparative study an experimental group of 7th grade boys with behavior problems was given training in developing personal goals, giving and receiving affection, accepting oneself as a worthwhile person, and language to express feelings. This group was compared with a control group of 7th grade boys who received no such training. At the conclusion of the study the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher self-esteem and made greater improvements in their behavior than those in the control group.(32)

Project Youth, a drug abuse prevention program operating in New York City involves group counseling session which include discussion, role playing, decision making and esteem building exercises. Pretest and posttest results indicate that the program has been effective in increasing group cohesiveness, developing more positive attitudes, and building self-esteem. (33)

In working with adult criminal offenders, a client-centered approach was demonstrated to be more effective than other techniques in increasing ex-offender's chances of rehabilitation. With this approach the probation officer establishes a relation of trust with the probationer, emphasizes with the client's emotional experiences, and works to bring about an increase in the probationer's self-esteem. This was found to be an effective way to bring about behavioral changes. (34)

Visionquest, a residential treatment program for juvenile delinquents located in Arizona and Colorado, offered counseling for parents, youth, and family. After 6 months results showed significant positive changes in measures of self-esteem, self-concept, alienation, and attitudes towards the law, considered to be four critical areas for rehabilitation. (35)

Prevention programs are now being used in Los Angeles in both public and Catholic schools to reduce gang violence. These programs are based on the recognition that gang membership fulfills many basic human needs. These programs focus on the elements of self-esteem, including security, identity, belonging, purpose, personal responsibility, value formation, conflict resolution, and positive relationshps.(11, 36, 37)

The New York State Mentoring program has had such success that it has now expanded to communities throughout the state. The program is designed to provide support for at-risk students by helping them with their schoolwork and personal problems, and building self-esteem to encourage them to reach their potential.(38)

The report "Structural Impediments to Success: A Look at Disadvantaged Young Men in Urban Areas," developed by the Washington Center for Public Policy, states that today's disadvantaged young men desperately need supervision and improvements in their self-esteem to overcome the forces of poverty, joblessness, and racism that place them at risk of becoming involved in crime and violence. (39)

In a control study in three school districts, the use of the Building Self-Esteem Program was found to significantly reduce the incidence of anti-social behavior in schools, a critical concern in schools today. The program has demonstrated in other situations that fostering self-esteem in students can result in higher academic achievement, and significantly reduce vandalism, truancy, pregnancies, drug use, and acts of crime and violence in school settings.(40)

Conclusion

While the causes of crime and violence are multiple and complex, the evidence is clear. Self-esteem is obviously a critical factor as both a source of prevention and an essential element of rehabilitation and behavioral change. It is, therefore, imperative that programs designed to address the problem of crime and violence incorporate a strong component in self-esteem. All who work with children and adolescents, especially parents and educators, should receive training in the significance of self-esteem and what can be done about it.

Additional information can be obtained from Self-Esteem Resources, 234 Montgomery Lane, Port Ludlow, WA 98365.

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